

N I C A T O R

# SELEUCUS I

## AND HIS EMPIRE

LISE HANNESTAD



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# Introduction

This book is the result of many years of development. In the early 1990s I began working on a book with the preliminary title of *Archaeology of the Seleucid Empire*. Much of the manuscript was written when, due to other pressing tasks, I had to put the project on hold. Some years later, my interest in the Hellenistic Near East was reignited and I found myself with the time to return to the idea of producing a book on the subject. However, my interest had changed from a general interest in the material culture of the Seleucid Empire to something more specific, i.e. a biography of Seleucus I and his empire. This, of course, meant that the source material with which I had to work also changed. It expanded to include a greater focus on the written sources, both literary and epigraphical, in the Greek, Latin and Babylonian cuneiform scripts. But the material culture still plays a substantial role in this study, due to its value for understanding the much discussed issues of continuity and change during the transition from the Achaemenid to the Seleucid Empire, the colonisation scheme of Seleucus and the interaction between local populations and Greek and Macedonian immigrants.

During my years as a young student of classical archaeology in the 1960s, no other scholarly work caught my interest and opened my eyes to the same extent as M. Rostovtzeff's *The Social and Economic History of the Hellenistic World* (1941). The breadth of Rostovtzeff's knowledge and his eminent ability to combine history and archaeology fascinated me completely, and rereading this work over the decades since has only kept my admiration intact. Years later, the pioneering work of S. Sherwin-White and A. Kuhrt, *From Samarkhand to Sardis: A New Approach to the Seleucid Empire* (1993), also made extensive use of both written sources and archaeological material. By that time, I had myself been working with Hellenistic material from the Near East over a long period, and, though I do not agree with the main thesis of the book, i.e. that the Seleucid kingdom was simply



a successor of the Achaemenid Empire, it definitely brought new life to the study of the Hellenistic East.

This is not the first biography on Seleucus. Indeed, within the last 50 years, two such books have appeared: A. Mehl, *Seleukos Nikator und sein Reich* (1970) and J.D. Grainger, *Seleukos Nikator* (1990). So what is it that keeps generation after generation of scholars fascinated by Seleucus? The answer may of course vary from person to person, but perhaps Seleucus' life as a whole is the simple answer. From the outset of the chain of events beginning with Alexander's expedition in 333, Seleucus was an unlikely winner of the bid for power following Alexander's death in 323, and was only appointed satrap under the Triparadeisus agreement three years later. Until the culmination of the Babylonian War (see chapter 4) he was not in the same league as Antigonos, Ptolemy or Lysimachos. However, by the end, he was not only the last surviving Diadoch, but he was also undefeated in the great battles between the Diadochs which characterised the period. Later, this led to him being given the surname Nicator.<sup>1</sup> In 301 he contributed decisively to the defeat of Antigonos at Ipsus and in 281 he defeated Lysimachos at Corupedium. By this time, the two combatants were both in their late 70s and had spent most of their adult lives campaigning. Following this last battle, Seleucus wanted to move on to his old homeland, Macedonia, but was murdered shortly after reaching the European mainland (see chapter 5). Thus ended an epoch that had begun with Alexander's anabasis more than 50 years earlier.

### *Written sources*

The literary sources on Seleucus' life are few; in fact, he is the least mentioned of the Diadochs in the preserved Greek and Roman literature. Unlike Ptolemy, he did not himself, as far as we know, leave memoirs or any other written evidence. He seems to have had no Greek historian at his court, as Eumenes and later Antigonos had Hieronymus of Cardia; if he did, no evidence is preserved, apart, perhaps, from a number of myths about Seleucus whose origins are lost in the mists of time. It is possible that Appian used such a source (see below).

Much of the preserved Greco-Roman historical material on the early Hellenistic period is secondary, based on works of earlier Greek authors. This is also the case for the time of Alexander and his Successors. Our

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1 For example, an inscription in Magnesia from the time of Antiochos III (OGIS 233; see also chapter 8).

best source for the latter is Arrian's *Alexander's Anabasis*.<sup>2</sup> Arrian explicitly states that he has based his work on those of two contemporary eyewitness sources: on the 'memories' of Ptolemy and Aristobulus, who was probably an engineer or architect. He also notes when he has used the official Royal Diaries, the so-called *Ephemerides*.<sup>3</sup> In his preface, Arrian presents the following argument:

'Wherever Ptolemy son of Lagus and Aristobulus son of Aristobulus have both given the same accounts of Alexander son of Philip, it is my practice to record what they say as completely true, but where they differ, to select the version I regard as more trustworthy and also better worth telling. In fact other writers have given a variety of accounts of Alexander, nor is there any other figure of whom there are more historians who are more contradictory of each other, but in my view Ptolemy and Aristobulus are more trustworthy in their narrative, since Aristobulus took part in King Alexander's expedition, and Ptolemy not only did the same, but as he himself was a king, mendacity would have been more dishonourable for him than for anyone else; again both wrote when Alexander was dead and neither was under any constraint or hope of gain to make him set down anything but what actually happened.'<sup>4</sup>

When reading Arrian, one clearly notes a change in the narrative. In the first books on Alexander's three great battles against Darius until he leaves Susa (III.16), the style is rather stiff, with stress on the names of high-ranking officers; for this part, one could imagine that Ptolemy used the Royal Diaries (*Ephemerides*).<sup>5</sup> After the stay in Susa (book III.17 onwards), the narrative becomes much more lively, often with a focus on Ptolemy himself. It is quite possible that from this point onwards Ptolemy often relied on his own diaries. Arrian also wrote a work titled *Events after Alexander*. Hieronymus was probably the main source for this,<sup>6</sup> but, sadly, only fragments are preserved.

The main literary source for the period after the death of Alexander is Diodorus Siculus, who wrote a *Bibliotheca Historica* in 40 volumes between 60 and 30 BC; books I–V and XI–XX survive. Books XVIII–XX

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2 For Arrian and his work, see Cartledge, P. in Romm and Mensch, XIII–XXVIII (2012); also Baynham, E. *ibid.* 325–32; Bosworth 1988.

3 For a discussion of their origin, see Bosworth 1988, 157–84.

4 Translation P.A. Brunt, Loeb 1976.

5 Also, Hammond is of the opinion that Alexander's Diaries were accessible to Ptolemy, probably being kept in Alexandria (1988, 17).

6 Walbank 1988, 96.